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ABSTRACT

Ideas of educational psycholinguists Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman can be combined with the ideas presented in current basal reader manuals to help teachers teach reading more effectively. Since reading and speaking are parallel processes, teachers may invite children to "read" with them, hearing the melody of language as they point to interesting or dramatic sentences in the text. Assisted reading, in which the child reads the same text after the teacher, is another useful device. Basal reader authors and psycholinguists agree on the need to continue to refine and enrich oral language competency. Even though we read for meaning more than for word identification, basal readers emphasize word identification as the foundation of comprehension. Basal readers stress phonics, but Smith and Goodman argue that teaching phonics makes it harder, not easier, for children to learn to read. Smith's view of the relativity of comprehension, however, is affirmed by the writers of most basal reader manuals. Both psycholinguists and basal reader authors recognize that reading involves using visual clues to predict meaning. The Directed Reading Activity, a series of steps used in basal readers to promote children's predictive strategies, is the best way not only of teaching reading skills but of stimulating student interest. Research also indicates the usefulness of miscue analysis and the questionable value of recall tests. (JL)

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UTILIZING PSYCHOLINGUISTIC INSIGHTS IN TEACHING VIA THE BASAL READER

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The views of educational psycholinguists like Drs. Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman about what reading is and how it should be taught conflict with the philosphy and methodology exemplified in the program of the basal reader - the medium of instruction employed by over 90 per cent of this nation's elementary school teachers. The writings of Smith and Goodman contain some insightful ideas which when combined with those presented in current basal reader manuals can help teachers to become more confident, understanding and productive teachers of reading.

Psycholinguists believe that if novice readers are immersed in a sea of interesting meaningful print they ought to be able to learn to read as easily as they learned to speak. This is because reading and speaking are parallel processes of communication which depend on vocabulary development, grasp of grammatical structure and knowledge of the sounds of our language. It is by being exposed to a world of stimulating print that children will discover for themselves sound - symbol relationships that together with their knowledge of syntax and word meanings that they've acquired in the process of listening and speaking will help them to learn to read as naturally as they learned to talk.

Many inexperienced teachers who are obsessed with the complexty of teaching reading ought to find these ideas appealing because they suggest that they can build on the important resources that children bring to the reading act. Imagine what teaching reading would be like if all children entered first grade, as do many deaf children, without of fund of vocabulary words (estimated to vary from 4,000 - 25,000 words), <u>without</u> an understanding of word order and without the ability to perceive the sounds of our language! Teachers who view children as sophisticated language

learners and users will more likely than not be motivated by a sense of positive expectancy about their children's potential for acquiring literacy and their own capabilities for accomplishing this goal. To supplement what they ordinarily do when using the basal reader teachers may invite children to "read" with them hearing the melody of language as they point to interesting or dramatic sentences in the text. Assisted reading is another device that may help children to adapt their language power to a reading situation. Kenneth Hoskissons's procedure is to have the teacher read an interesting selection which the child reads after him acquiring through constant practice the knack of recognizing words in print. Eventually the child reads on his own. A language experience approach in which children dictate to their teacher a story based on their observations or experiences provides a natural tie-in between spoken and written language. Children delight in seeing they can "read" what their teacher has printed on the chalkboard or chart.

The basal reader philosphy is designed to avoid a trial and error approach to learning by insuring that children are taught in a systematic manner those strategies which will enable them to make sense of written language. While recognizing the similarities that exist among the language arts - so aptly described by the psycholinguist- the authors of current readers devote a considerable amount of time and space to direct instruction in developing strategies for dealing with eye language. They are very cautious about assuming that oral language competency is sufficient to produce effective readers especially in view of the fact that many competent language users in society (who learned to speak easily enough) are poor readers. Too, the experiences

of many teachers who work with novice readers suggests that there are large numbers of children whose linguistic knowledge is inadequate. These children require intensive oral language develpment training. Psycholinguists and basal reader authors agree on the need to continue to refine and enrich oral language competency because it is the foundation for the acquisition of literacy. Teachers who experiment with some of the ideas inherent in psycholiguistic philosophy have an opportunity to discover for themselves what should be the balance between structure and "natural" learning.

Kenneth Goodman says that words have no reality in themselves out of the context of language. Learning to recognize words in his view is more difficult than reading language. We can read a series of words yet not understand what they mean because meaning transcends word identification. Frank Smith notes that according to Charles Fries 500 most common English words have 28 distinct dictionary meanings each and concludes that words by themselves do not constitute true units of meaning. He further assures us that we read for meaning rather than word identification. Psycholinguistic research suggests that this is true because many of children's word miscues or substitutions are sensible. (e.g. pie for cake) within the context of whole language. Also words may be omitted without loss of meaning.

Teachers who teach reading with this information ir mind will not become so preoccupied with teaching their students word recognition skills divorced from the larger-meaning-bearing patterns of language. They will be careful not only to teach children to recognize words within their audio-lingual vocabulary but to provide sufficient context for them to determine the meanings of new words.

The basal reader exercises emphasize the importance of word identification and recognition as the foundation on which comprehension relies. Even though a mature reader may find it unnecessary to read every word in order to understand what he is reading, the beginning reader, once able to recognize quickly many words at sight, can then concentrate on comprehension. The greater the ability of the child to recognize words and their meanings, the more efficiently will he be able to utilize grammatical and semantic clues to discover meaning.

Psycholinguists, in general, are averse to giving direct instruction in phonics. Goodman feels that since children already know their sounds (how could they communicate if they didn't?), they ought to be able to discover sound symbol relationships through wide reading of printed material. Phonics deals with the "bits and pieces" of language. Its purpose according to Goodman is to teach the "processing of language to get to sounds or to get to words" and as such does very little to utilize the "power of language" that a child has acquired. Smith states that one of the ways to make the teaching of reading difficult is to teach phonics. He believes that phonics rules are unreliable, cumbersome and confusing. Goodman and Smith emphasize that the preoccupation with using phonics deflects children from the search for meaning since children learn to see the trees but not the forest.

The basal reader point of view is that a more-or-less systematic presentation of phonics information provides children with a valuable tool for approximating the sounds of words that are in their speaking and listening vocabulary. Phonics works best when it operates in the environment of whole language occurring in meaningful context. As such, phonics becomes a comprehension centered tool for discovering or for affirming meaning. Teachers

must not become so overly concerned with phonics instruction that they neglect other crucial areas of instruction. As children develop into more mature readers and their dependence on visual information decreases so does their reliance upon phonics. It is at the beginning stage of reading when a child is more dependent on identifying words in order to derive meaning (assuming that he knows what they mean in spoken English) that phonics plays a significant role.

Psycholinguists believe that reading is a highly personal, subjective process in which one's value system (sometimes referred to as integrating strategies) determine the potency or emphasis that one is willing to accord to an author's statements. It is not possible, they say, for all readers to derive the same meaning from a story. Smith avers that comprehension is relative depending on the nature of the questions that are asked. Comprehension in his view is not a quantity that can be determined by a test because an individual may not feel that he really understands a story even though his score on the questions asked was good. Comprehension, he states, is a "state of having no unanswered questions." Another way of expressing the meaning of comprehension is to say it is a reduction of uncertainty that arises from having your questions answered. In other words the final test of comprehension is centered within the individual.

Teachers who keep these points in mind will not expect that pupils' responses to questions must correspond to their own. Teachers will be more responsive to and encouraging of divergent responses.

The typical basal reader manual supports the view that reading can be made more precise when children are asked to read for specific purposes:

detecting main ideas, distinguishing facts from opinions, anticipating, events, etc.

The variety of reading - study skills exercises that proliferate in current basal reader manuals suggest that the authors view reading, as did A. I. Gates the co-author of the early Gates' readers, as "one of selecting, evaluating and organizing a series of rather subjective impressions".

These skills exercises are designed to get children to read and think about what they read in many different ways. Comprehension becomes therefore very much a process described by Smith as "finding answers to cognitive questions". Smith's view of the relativity of comprehension is in large measure affirmed by the writers of most basal reader manuals.

Aside from a variety of exercises that encourage children to make predictions, the single most important means by which basal reader users promote children's prediction strategies is the Directed Reading Activity. This consists of a series of steps including developing readiness, clarifying vocabulary and concepts, guiding silent reading and rereading through purposeful questions, skill development and enrichment.

Psycholinguists place importance upon reading as an information processing act. Reading is a selective process in which an individual guided by his store of non-visual information he carries in his brain in the form of knowledge, concepts and experience interacts with language in order to obtain meaning. A good reader uses the least amount of visual information to make the best possible first guesses, according to Goodman. This is because he is able to take advantage of the redundancy (information available from more than one source) that appears in a passage, furnish grammatical and semantic input

and utilize efficient sampling skills. The act of reading involves, according to Goodman, selecting graphic cues, predicting input, combining what one sees with what one expects to see, supplying grammatical and semantic information stored in the brain, making guesses on the basis of visual and non-visual input, confirming or disconfirming these hypotheses on the basis, of whether they make sense (if they don't, then going back and picking up more visual information) and integrating the information with what is already known.

The implications of this information for teachers is that they must provide children with many opportunities to engage in the "psycholinguistic guessing game" setting their own purposes for reading and predicting on the bases of these purposes. Children should be encouraged to predict and test their predictions using semantic cues (The gas attendant filled the tank with _____.), syntactic cues (The gas attendant is _____ the tank with gas.) and graphophonic cues (Please pass the bread and ch_____.) Since the three language systems operate similtaneously, it is better to use real language rather than contrived language. Exercises of this type are often of value in helping children to understand that they possess the resources to make sense of what they read - that meaning is both input and output - that reading can be meaningful only to the extent that the one brings meaning to the selection.

The basal reader program is designed to develop, extend and enrich pupils' learnings about people, events, places and ideas on a variety of topics and subject areas. Children who have a resource of non-visual information in the form of knowledge and concepts are in a more strategic position to relate to and understand material on these topics. They are better able to raise questions - to predict and anticipate what is "around the corner". The emphasis

that is placed upon word identification techniques is designed to increase children's control over language - to facilitate their ability to utilize what Goodman calls the "cue systems in the flow of language". If there are too many words that children are unable to identify and recognize then their ability to utilize grammatical patterns, redundancy,patterns of word order and context are seriously impaired. One of the most valuable adjuncts that teachers can utilize to help children to relate vicariously to the material they are reading is the Directed Reading Activity. This activity (previously described) not only increases the predictability of the reading matter but also furnishes children with greater incentive and stimulation.

Research conducted by Goodman and his associates (Carolyn Burke and Yetta Goodman) now permits teachers to examine and classify in a more meaningful way the substitutions that children make when reading orally. Through miscue analysis, teachers develop greater insight into childrens' uses and misuses of language. When a child's pattern of miscues reveals a number that are visually similar (e.g. cake for coke) but syntactically and semantically unacceptable there is the strong possibility that instruction in phonics is not likely to solve the problem. On the other hand instruction in phonics may be indicated when a child's pattern of miscues suggest that he is reading for meaning as evidenced by the large number miscues that are contextually acceptable but not exactly on target. e.g. pie for cake - house for home

Teachers who view miscues as "windows" through which to observe the reading process will regard oral reading repetitions not as errors but as strengths or strategies designed to make sense of print. Teachers who value the suggestions of psycholinguists will encourage their pupils to take risks

and to test their educated guesses in terms of graphophonic information, semantic informal and syntactical information.

Another insight that teachers can gain from psycholinguists is that comprehension that is measured by tests of recall does not measure the child's underlying language competence. Such tests are affected by memory and by the ambiguity or incompleteness of the questions as well as by the medium used by the child to communicate responses e.g. speaking, or writing. Goodman suggests that teachers can obtain a better assessment of a child's ability to read for meaning by noting his comprehending score. This refers to the percent of miscues that are semantically acceptable plus the percent of miscues that do not make sense which are self-corrected.

Teachers who utilize the psycholinguistic insights provided by Goodman and Smith within the context of basal reader philosophy and methodology ought to be better able to maximize their influence in promoting more effective readers.

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